EU-RUSSIA CIVIL SOCIETY FORUM
6th General Assembly
Budapest, 07 December 2015

Welcome address by Vygaudas Ušackas,
European Union Ambassador to the Russian Federation

Ladies and gentlemen¹,

I wish to thank the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade of Hungary and Minister of State István Ígyártó and in particular civil society organisations of Hungary for hosting the sixth General Assembly of the EU-Russia Civil Society Forum.

I’d also like to greet Mr Vladimir Sergeev, the Ambassador of the Russian Federation to Hungary who is also here with us today.

It is a pleasure for me to attend this Annual Assembly and meet so many representatives of civil society from the EU and Russia.

Coming from the grass-root initiative of Russian and European Union activists, in 2011 when it was created, the Civil Society Forum represented merely a small group of activists. Four years later, we witness the gathering of a record number of participants.

Your efforts to be a common EU-Russia civic voice, which by definition is a challenging task as each member organisation deals with a specific issue and originates from a different country and context, are truly commendable.

Throughout the years, the Forum has become a trans-border centre of gravity for NGOs dealing with a whole spectrum of civil society issues. It provides an excellent platform for Russian and European NGOs, by working together, for the promotion and defence of universally recognised fundamental freedoms and human rights, democracy and the rule of law. In addition, it offers a unique opportunity for sharing experiences and expertise and for providing support between EU and Russian NGOs.

This opportunity is all the more important, considering how much the situation of civil society in Russia has worsened since we last met in Tallinn a year ago. Over these 12

¹ Check against delivery
months we have seen the continued implementation, at a growing pace, of the law on "foreign agents". More than 100 NGOs are now labelled "foreign agents". On top of that, the law on "undesirable" foreign and international organisations introduced in May this year is seen by many as a further instrument for limiting and pressuring the healthy functioning of Russian civil society.

The recent decision (on 1 December) by Russian authorities to list the Open Society Foundations and the Open Society Institute Assistance Foundation as "undesirable organisations" along with the National Endowment for Democracy is a further restriction to the space for civil society in Russia.

Since the adoption of this law, the EU has been calling on the Russian authorities not to proceed with its implementation. We call on Russia to respect its international commitments and obligations and guarantee the exercise of fundamental freedoms in the country.

In addition to the above, Russian NGOs are overwhelmed with numerous inspections, fines and exhaustive court cases. Instead of concentrating on their core tasks of helping people, they have to allocate scare resources to address these attacks.

But, if we go back in the not so distant past, to the time when Russia seemed to embrace democratic principles (and the liberal concept of the world) we see that the situation was not always so worrisome. The recently inaugurated Yeltsin Presidential Centre, whose opening I attended, pays special tribute to the freedoms that were wholeheartedly accepted in the 90's and enshrined in the Russian Constitution. During the opening ceremony, attended by state leadership, but also by a broad spectrum of prominent public figures, a feeling of nostalgia for the times of growing pluralism, respect of individual liberties and broad societal democratization dominated the event.

A healthy society is one where voices are diverse and independent and people are free to express their views, without fear and intimidation. Unfortunately, we've seen that the task of Russian civil society to contribute to the public debate and to the decision making processes has become more difficult.

Under these circumstances the Forum serves as an important platform for demonstrating solidarity with the representatives of civil society and human rights defenders regardless of whether they belong to Russia or the EU. And we know that the Steering Committee of the Forum did not shy and expressed concern over certain moves of the host government of today's event towards the NGOs Ökotárs and Demnet. The most recent illustrations of such solidarity are expressed in statements on the unfounded and arbitrary pressure on Memorial or Magomed Mutsolgov.

You also react to nowadays burning issues such as terrorism, migration flows and refugee crisis. Later this morning we will hear from representatives of the Hungarian civil society how the country is coping with the unprecedented flow of refugees and how we can work together to ease that pressure. It is important that when we address the
root causes of conflicts we maintain inclusiveness of societies and ensure equality of rights while receiving asylum seekers and migrants.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

When the Civil Society Forum was created, our relations with Russia were very different from today. Our agenda was positive and ambitious. We looked at Russia as a country ready to embrace principles of democratic governance and modern market economy. It was believed this would bring our relations to a new level.

The illegal annexation of Crimea, followed by the destabilisation of Eastern Ukraine, eroded the foundations of our relations. However, Ukraine and the common fight against the threat of international terrorism can also reunite us again. When it comes to the Ukrainian angle of our relationship, prerequisite for the normalization of our bilateral relations remains to be full implementation of the Minsk agreements. One should admit that we are not there yet, but there is no dramatic deterioration either.

On the other hand, being interdependent on a wide range of bilateral and multilateral issues, such as trade, energy, migration, climate change, the EU and Russia need to meet, to talk and to work together at least where our common interests coincide.

Currently, the focus falls on the situation in Syria and in regards to the latest heinous terrorist attacks on the Russian aircraft, killings in Paris and bombing in Beirut - on the need to define and implement sustainable global response to the terrorist threats coming from ISIL\Daesh and other UN-designated terrorist groups.

The priority number one in Syria must be to fight these organizations with the widest possible international effort while simultaneously developing the process of political transition in Damascus. From the beginning of the unrest in Syria, the EU has firmly believed that the only solution for the crisis is a political one.

That is why the EU lends its full support to the political process recently started in Vienna. Moreover, the EU has, since the beginning of the unrest mobilised €4.4 billion for relief and recovery assistance to Syrians in their country and in the neighbouring countries.

As you know, the HR\VP Mogherini and Foreign Minister Lavrov maintain close contact and continue consultations with a view to define how to tackle Syrian crisis and how to support political process under the leadership of the UN.

Despite political difficulties it is also important to bear in mind how interdependent we are:

- The EU is and will likely remain Russia’s main trade and investment partner. Let me illustrate this with some telling figures: in the first half of 2015, 46% of Russia’s Foreign Trade was with the EU, no matter any restrictive measures. By means of comparison, the share of the Asian-Pacific Region (APEC) was 27.6%, and the Eurasian Union accounted for 7.6% of Russian trade.
• We are still the most natural trading partners in energy. Petroleum and gas exports account for almost 70% of Russia's total export revenues, the European Union being by far the largest buyer.

• There is increased interest for the science and education cooperation. This academic year, approximatively 3500 students and university staff will participate in EU funded short term credit mobility schemes organised between Russian and EU universities.

• Russia is the leading non-EU country participating in our Cross-Border Cooperation programmes.

• Russia remains to be largely the country where most Schengen visas are issued.

To support Russian human rights defenders and civil society we just finalised the selection of 18 new projects for the total amount of 10 mln EUR. A new annual call for projects will be launched in spring of 2016 under our flagship human rights programme “European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights”. 20. In July 2015, the EU Delegation to Russia has signed a contract with the German Russian Exchange to implement a project of 1.5 million EUR on behalf of the Forum.

I count on your active participation in view of supporting the Forum to foster cooperation and solidarity between Russian and EU representatives of civil society.

I also hope that the funds which are made available from the EU will enable to conduct outreach activities by the civil society representatives in order to contribute to better EU-Russia relations in the coming years.

In view of guaranteeing the sustainability of the Forum’s future activities, I take this opportunity to call on other donors in providing support to this permanent platform.

We are confident that the activities of the Forum be it internships of activists in Russian and European NGOs, an annual meeting of young professionals “Eurolab”, exhibitions on our common historical memory including on political repression during the Stalin regime other outreach and advocacy activities like the General Assembly we are here today will help further cultivate relationships between NGOs and other representatives of the civil society

The EU, and the EU Delegation to Russia, remains committed to the promotion and protection of universally recognised rights and fundamental freedoms and to support your work. Therefore, we look forward to working together on issues of common concern and interest.

Thank you!